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ADDRESS
OF
PRESIDENT WILSON
AT THE
GRIDIRON DINNER
(NEW WILLARD)

WASHINGTON, D. C.
FEBRUARY 26, 1916

(SO MANY REQUESTS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED AT THE WHITE HOUSE FROM
THOSE ATTENDING THE DINNER THAT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS BE
PUBLISHED THAT BOTH THE PRESIDENT AND THE GRIDIRON
CLUB HAVE CONSENTED TO ITS PUBLICATION)



WASHINGTON
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ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT WILSON

AT THE GRIDIRON DINNER, FEBRUARY 26, 1916.

MR. TOASTMASTER AND GENTLEMEN :

I have very little to say to-night except to express my warm appreciation of the invariable courtesy of this club and of the reception you have so generously accorded me. I find that I am seldom tempted to say anything nowadays unless somebody starts something, and to-night nobody has started anything.

Your talk, Mr. Toastmaster, has been a great deal about candidacy for the presidency. It is not a new feeling on my part, but one which I entertain with a greater intensity than formerly, that a man who seeks the Presidency of the United States for anything that it will bring to him is an audacious fool. The responsibilities of the office ought to sober a man even before he approaches it. One of the difficulties of the office seldom appreciated, I dare say, is that it is very difficult to think while so many people are talking, and particularly while so many people are talking in a way that obscures counsel and is entirely off the point.

The point in national affairs, gentlemen, never lies along the lines of expediency. It always rests in the field of principle. The United States was not founded upon any principle of expediency; it was founded upon a profound principle of human liberty and of humanity, and whenever it bases its policy upon any other foundations than those it builds on the sand and not upon solid rock. It seems to me that the most enlightening thing a man can do is suggested by something which the Vice President said to-night. He complained that he found men who, when their attention was called to the signs of spring, did not see the blue heaven, did not see the movement of the free clouds, did not think of the great spaces of the quiet continent, but thought only of some immediate and pressing piece of business. It seems to me that if you do not think of the things that lie beyond and away from and disconnected from this scene in which we attempt to think and conclude, you will inevitably be led astray. I would a great deal rather know what they are talking about around quiet firesides all over this country than what they are talking about in the cloakrooms of Congress. I would a

great deal rather know what the men on the trains and by the way-side and in the shops and on the farms are thinking about and yearning for than hear any of the vociferous proclamations of policy which it is so easy to hear and so easy to read by picking up any scrap of printed paper. There is only one way to hear these things, and that is constantly to go back to the fountains of American action. Those fountains are not to be found in any recently discovered sources.

Senator Harding was saying just now that we ought to try when we are a hundred million strong to act in the same simplicity of principle that our forefathers acted in when we were three million strong. I heard somebody say—I do not know the exact statistics—that the present population of the United States is one hundred and three millions. If there are three million thinking the same things that that original three million thought, the hundred million will be saved for an illustrious future. They were ready to stake everything for an idea, and that idea was not expediency, but justice. And the infinite difficulty of public affairs, gentlemen, is not to discover the signs of the heavens and the directions of the wind, but to square the things you do by the not simple but complicated standards of justice. Justice has nothing to do with expediency. Justice has nothing to do with any temporary standard whatever. It is rooted and grounded in the fundamental instincts of humanity.

America ought to keep out of this war. She ought to keep out of this war at the sacrifice of everything except this single thing upon which her character and history are founded, her sense of humanity and justice. If she sacrifices that, she has ceased to be America; she has ceased to entertain and to love the traditions which have made us proud to be Americans, and when we go about seeking safety at the expense of humanity, then I for one will believe that I have always been mistaken in what I have conceived to be the spirit of American history.

You never can tell your direction except by long measurements. You can not establish a line by two posts; you have got to have three at least to know whether they are straight with anything, and the longer your line the more certain your measurement. There is only one way in which to determine how the future of the United States is going to be projected, and that is by looking back and seeing which way the lines ran which led up to the present moment of power and of opportunity. There is no doubt about that. There is no question what the roll of honor in America is. The roll of honor consists of the names of men who have squared their conduct by ideals of duty. There is no one else upon the roster; there is no one

else whose name we care to remember when we measure things upon a national scale. And I wish that whenever an impulse of impatience comes upon us, whenever an impulse to settle a thing some short way tempts us, we might close the door and take down some old stories of what American idealists and statesmen did in the past, and not let any counsel in that does not sound in the authentic voice of American tradition. Then we shall be certain what the lines of the future are, because we shall know we are steering by the lines of the past. We shall know that no temporary convenience, no temporary expediency, will lead us either to be rash or to be cowardly. I would be just as much ashamed to be rash as I would to be a coward. Valor is self-respecting. Valor is circumspect. Valor strikes only when it is right to strike. Valor withholds itself from all small implications and entanglements and waits for the great opportunity when the sword will flash as if it carried the light of heaven upon its blade.

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